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Understanding and Diagnosing Court Culture

Brian J. Ostrom
National Center for State Courts, bostrom@ncsc.org

Roger A. Hanson
National Center for State Courts, elizreg1558@comcast.net

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Court Review - Volume 45

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Yet, while the
courts. The larger investigation provides a comprehensive
framework for understanding court organizational culture,
along with a set of steps and tools to assess and measure a
court's current and preferred culture.6

• Diagnosing court culture. Using results from a large metro-

politan court, the measurement of court culture is demon-

strated, and illustrations are offered on how this type of infor-
mation can interpreted.

• Reactions from the field. Assessing court culture is still in

early stages of development, but there are already important
reactions to efforts to put culture on the court community's
agenda. The receptivity of judges and administrators in sev-
eral courts is discussed.

The unique contribution of culture is that it provides a road
map for court leaders seeking to improve the way work gets
done.

DESCRIBING COURT CULTURE

Court culture is conceived as the beliefs and behaviors shap-
ing "the way things get done" by the individuals—judges and
court administrators—who have the responsibility of ensuring
cases are resolved fairly and expeditiously. In many ways, cul-
ture shapes and defines what is possible in the work environ-
ment. Because judges and managers can develop and mold court
culture, they should attend to the assessment of their culture as
deliberatively as they do when making legal decisions and issu-
gring orders. The capacity of court culture to serve as a tool to
promote and achieve successful court administration can be
seen by looking at eight key aspects of this area of inquiry.

First, the concept of court culture focuses on the daily tasks
and ongoing relationships among the judges as well as between
judges and court staff members. As a result, it is grounded in

Footnotes
1. Raymond Nimmer, A Slightly Moveable Object: A Case Study in
Judicial Reform in the Criminal Justice Process: The Omnibus Hearing,
48 DEN. LAW J. 206. (1976) and Raymond Nimmer. THE NATURE
OF SYSTEM CHANGE: REFORM IMPACT IN CRIMINAL COURTS (1978).
2. Thomas W. Church, Jr., ALAN CARLSON, Jo-Lynne Q. Lee, and
TERESA TAN, JUSTICE DELAYED: THE PACE OF LITIGATION IN URBAN
TRIAL COURTS. (1978).
3. Thomas W. Church, Jr., The “Old and the New” Conventional
Wisdom, 7 JUST. SYS. J. 395 (1982).
5. Brian J. Ostrom and Roger A. Hanson, Efficiency, Timeliness, and
Quality (1999).
6. Brian J. Ostrom, Charles W. Ostrom, Jr., Roger A. Hanson, and
activities familiar to all courts. The effort to better understand court culture offers a practical means to make a difference in courts’ success.

Second, the NCSC approach to examining court culture allows judges and administrators to gain clarity on their current court culture, or the ways things are done, as well as their preferred culture, or the ways they would like to see the court operate in the future. It puts judges in the forefront of defining court administration rather than introducing a new management theory or proposed reform from the outside.

Third, the NCSC approach identifies a manageable and coherent set of cultures, which individually or in combination cover a wide range of courts. Specifically the NCSC framework identifies four distinct types of culture: communal, networked, autonomous, and hierarchical. They are defined as follows:

- **Communal:** Judges and managers emphasize the importance of getting along and acting collectively. Communal courts emphasize importance of group involvement and mutually agreed upon norms rather than established rules and firm lines of authority; flexibility is a key to management. Procedures are open to interpretation, and creativity is encouraged when it seems important to “do the right thing.”

- **Networked:** Judges and managers emphasize inclusion and coordination to establish a collaborative work environment and effective court-wide communication. Efforts to build consensus on court policies and practices extend to involving other justice system partners, groups in the community, and ideas emerging in society. Judicial expectations concerning the timing of key procedural events are developed and implemented through policy guidelines built on the deliberate involvement and consensus of the entire bench. Court leaders speak of courts being accountable for their performance and the outcomes they achieve.

- **Autonomous:** Judges and managers emphasize the importance of allowing each judge wide discretion to conduct business. Many judges in this type of court are most comfortable with the traditional adversary model of dispute resolution. Under this traditional approach, the judge is a relatively passive party who essentially referees investigations carried out by attorneys. Centralized leadership is inhibited as individual judges exercise latitude on key procedures and policies. Limited discussion and agreement exist on court-wide performance criteria and goals.

- **Hierarchical:** Judges and managers emphasize the importance of established rules and procedures to meet clearly stated court-wide objectives. These courts seek to achieve the advantages of order and efficiency, which are deemed essential goals in a world of limited resources, and calls for increased accountability. Effective leaders are good coordinators and organizers. Recognized routines and timely information are viewed as mechanisms for reducing uncertainty, confusion, and conflict in how judges and court staff make decisions.

The development of this fourfold typology is based on an analysis of how expert practitioners believe core values affect and relate to how work gets done. Sixteen values were culled from the literature on court administration including such distinct values as collegiality, continuity with the past, discretion, standard operating procedures, flexibility, rule-oriented, innovation, judicial consensus, and self-managing. Using a tightly structured questionnaire, 53 seasoned practitioners, including judges, administrators, prosecutors, and defense attorneys, compared and contrasted the values. This exercise asked the practitioners to indicate how closely each of the 16 values is related to each of the other 15 values. The results were obtained using the technique of multidimensional scaling, and the paired comparisons showed four clusters of four values each.

The clusters illustrate the core values of different types of cultures and are aligned along two dimensions called solidarity and sociability. These dimensions are intuitively understandable because solidarity refers to the degree to which a court has clearly understood shared goals, mutual interests, and common tasks while sociability refers to the degree to which people work together and cooperate in a cordial fashion.

Each of the four cultures is a particular combination of solidarity and sociability, as shown in Figure 1. Communal culture is low on solidarity and high on sociability. Its distinctive values are flexibility, egalitarianism, negotiation, and trust.

A network culture seeks both sociability and solidarity. Its values include judicial consensus, innovation, visionary thinking, and human development. An autonomous culture emphasizes neither sociability nor solidarity. Its values are self-managing, continuity, independence, and personal loyalty. And a hierarchical culture stresses solidarity but not sociability. Its values are rules, modern administration, standard operating procedures, and merit. These alternative clusters of values shape the way that work gets done, as discussed below.

The fourth key aspect of using culture as a tool for successful court administration is that culture is manifested in familiar and recognizable activities called “work areas,” such as the handling of cases, the responsiveness of courts to the concerns of the community, the division of labor and allocation of authority between judges and court staff members, and the manner in which court leadership is exercised. Each particular culture’s way of doing things is matched across four work areas in the Value Matrix (Figure 2).
Fifth, the framework does not imply any particular culture is inherently superior to another in the choice of work-related values. Every culture allows for a court to be deliberative and purposeful in its administrative decision making. Courts with different cultures simply are deliberative and purposeful in their own way.

This proposition is neither obvious nor simpleminded because it suggests every court can succeed in every work area, although some cultures might find it more difficult to excel in some areas than others. Taking case management as an example, this framework makes clear that there is no single definition or approach because how cases are handled depends on the culture that is present. Many readers will note that hierarchical case management comes closest to the traditional “best practice” model of controlling caseflow through the use of clear, uniform, and established rules enforced by administrative monitoring of standardized reports.

However, a court emphasizing a particular culture rather than another might find it harder to achieve particular goals, like effective case management. In every culture there are pitfalls that a court might encounter in translating the values into practice.

With case management, a common shortcoming is the failure to monitor ongoing court performance because judges and administrators assume things are getting done as intended. Moreover, the ability to detect problems is a more serious challenge in some cultures than in others because some cultures depend more on self-monitoring.

Sixth, cultures are measurable. A Court Culture Assessment Instrument, developed by the NCSC, can be used to determine how individual judges and administrators believe work gets done in key areas. Because each culture manifests itself differently, the instrument asks individuals to indicate how closely each of four ways of getting work done corresponds to what happens in their court (current culture) and what they would like to see as the work style in the future (preferred culture). The survey is available upon request.

An application of the framework to courts in California, Colorado, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and the Tax Court of Canada finds examples of each of the four cultures, although the autonomous culture is the most frequent. This balanced distribution suggests courts are not monochromatic in their work orientations. On the other

<table>
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<th>FIGURE 2: VALUE MATRIX</th>
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<td>Case Management Style</td>
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<td>COMMUNAL</td>
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<td>Flexibility: Judges follow accepted principles for the timing of key procedural events but are comfortable fashioning their own approach to “do the right thing.”</td>
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<td>Judge and Court Staff Relations</td>
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<td>Change Management Negotiation</td>
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<td>Courthouse Leadership</td>
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hand, regardless of the current culture, the vast majority of courts under study indicate a similar mosaic-like preference for the future. Specifically, they tend to desire hierarchical orientations to dominate in the work areas of case management and change management, networked orientations to dominate judge-staff member relations, and a communal culture to dominate the area of courthouse leadership.

Seventh, culture is found to have direct effects on a court’s ability to achieve legal ideals, such as timeliness, access, fairness, and managerial effectiveness, but this empirical relationship does not presume any one culture is more desirable than another. A reason why some cultures might come closer than others is because judges and managers in some courts act to avoid the limitations associated with their present culture.

Eighth, the difference between a current culture and a preferred culture is a natural basis for defining “planned change.” Judges and managers who take the culture survey can see where they are now and where they would like to be. The task then becomes looking at and determining what existing policies, procedures, and practices require adjustment to move to a more preferred state of affairs.

**DIAGNOSING COURT CULTURE**

The study of culture provides a way to understand the most fundamental administrative concerns and goals that are shared by most of the people in a court, that tend to shape judge and staff behavior, and that often persist over time. Culture is not just a set of views, beliefs, and perspectives. It is the grounds for how work gets done. Each culture reflects alternative ways that responsibilities can be carried out and provides a means to compare and contrast actual operations among individual courts. A court’s payoff in conducting its own culture analysis is a deeper understanding of how its culture manifests itself in the observable world of how work gets done. Each culture—and the values it espouses—shapes in a distinctive manner the way cases are handled, how the court responds to its environment, how the court uses staff members, and the overall direction of the court.

Culture focuses attention on aspects of the work environment exercising a strong, independent influence on the completion of the tasks vital to the maintenance and functioning of the legal process. Values composing a court’s culture shape the how, why, and when of decisions made by judges and the activities conducted by staff members. Because these individuals are responsible for putting policies and procedures into place, they are the key ingredients for ideas to take hold. Until a court’s values are incorporated into daily routines and work habits, they stand very little chance of influencing court performance. For this reason, cultural values are more important to assess as indicators of the current state of affairs than virtually any other aspect of a court, such as structure, organization, process, or resources.

The assessment of current and preferred cultures provides a realistic picture of what is both a feasible and meaningful degree of change in how a court does business. By capturing a court’s preferred culture, insight is gained into what judges and administrators aspire to achieve. The aspirations are not purely idealistic, however, because they are views on how judges and administrators would like to see business conducted in the common work areas of case management, change management, and so forth.

This approach to assessing court culture is illustrated with results from a large US metropolitan court. Following completion of the Court Culture Assessment Instrument in this court, the results showed there to be important differences between judges and senior staff members on the most appropriate kind of case management the court should seek to implement. Their current and preferred views are displayed below in the form of “kites.” Figure 3A focuses on judges, and Figure 3B focuses on senior staff.

Both have fairly similar views on the current style of case management, which is that judges tend to fashion their own approaches (a primarily autonomous style). In addition, going forward, both would like to reduce the degree of autonomy in case management. Differences emerge on the direction of the future change. The shape of the darker superimposed preferred kites shows that judges tend to favor loosely enforced case-processing norms (what is referred to as a Communal culture), while senior staff have a strong preference for the handling of cases to be governed by a relatively uniform application of the rules (a more Hierarchical culture).

This particular pair of contending perspectives is a useful prism through which to understand the nature of contemporary courts as they seek to determine the right balance between discretion and the uniform application of rules. Several important patterns and implications are seen in Figures 3A and 3B.

First, and foremost, the data suggest serious, dedicated, and knowledgeable practitioners in the same court hold to different views or definitions on how cases should be handled in the future. Both the judges and senior court managers in this court realize the legal process involves the effective scheduling, arranging, and conducting of a series of key procedural events. The work involved in discharging that function is called case management. But alternative views do exist on the exact manner of how this critical area of work should be carried out. And to successfully implement a workable case management plan, a court must understand and address these differences in perspective.

In addition, it is hardly surprising that judges and managers have different opinions on the steps necessary to improve case management. Because judges are in the courtroom or chambers every day, and managers generally are not present in these settings, judges are more sensitive to and aware of the raw human drama and emotion surrounding individual cases. Consequently, they are more likely to view uniformity as a goal but not a universally appropriate way to deal with real-world circumstances in the courtroom. Judges are much more likely to discern the need for “improvisation” and individually tailored methods that downplay formalities and standardization.

The somewhat weak embrace of uniform case management by judges also is a natural product of a general desire by judges to retain collegiality when they have it (or think they have it). Judges who otherwise might see the benefits in a more standard case-handling practice are understandably reluctant to give up a sense of friendly relations with colleagues in exchange for a more austere work atmosphere, which they associate with a uniform rule application style of managing. As one judge in the court under study observed about case management, “I have the sense that the culture of our judiciary is that no one is going to force any judge to do it in a certain way. There is a high degree of collegiality that we want to keep.”
To the extent that this sentiment is representative, the data in Figures 3A and 3B provide a clue on what inhibits judges from accepting the form of case management that leading experts in the field advocate as the way, and perhaps the only way, to achieve efficiency and timeliness. The benefits of a standardized case management scheme are not by themselves sufficient to lure judges to consider moving from a combination of an autonomous and communal system to a more hierarchical one. An implication from this situation is that a system of uniform rules has its drawbacks or limitations despite its promise of a more timely resolution process. Timeliness by itself is not appealing enough to attract adherents of uniform rules even among judges who might see limitations in their current circumstances. This possibility helps to explain why most American courts have not adopted uniform rules and put them in practice despite over 30 years of advocacy by judicial administration leaders.

Finally, the results from Figures 3A and 3B point out how courts can both reconcile conflicting preferences and generally chart a course of cultural change and accompanying practices. Specifically, reconciliation between the bench and senior staff members in this court became the mutual agreement to move toward a more networked orientation of case management. The judges can retain the value of collegiality and avoid a straitjacket prohibiting deviations when and where necessary by moving toward a networked culture. Similarly, court managers can move in the same direction and gain the value of guidelines in managing cases over unfettered judicial discretion, which they see as a clear deficit.

Moreover, the joint move to a more networked, case-management-oriented culture reduces the problems of initial implementation and increases abilities of both groups to suggest corrective action to remove any administrative friction they experience in trying out a new approach to handling cases. In fact, both groups gain from the experience of working smoothly together under a new regime and can use it as a stepping-stone to a potential move toward a more hierarchical approach. Judges can see how friendship is not necessarily sacrificed by moving away from an autonomous and communal position whereas managers can see how an appreciable increase in efficiency is achievable without tightly prescribed rules. Such knowledge facilitates the transition for the consideration of any additional moves in the future. For all these reasons, the NCSC recommended such a move to the court under study, which in fact accepted and began implementing this advice. Thus, by examining its culture, a court is in a prime position to define its future through a series of planned steps from its current to its preferred culture and is able to accomplish this task even when there are internal differences within the institution.

REACTI0NS FROM THE FIELD

Because it is possible to measure the four cultures and because the difference between current culture and preferred culture is an internally inspired basis for reform, cultural analysis is now being accepted by many judicial leaders as a sufficiently promising idea to explore and to test out in the real world. For this reason, the NCSC has been engaged with a variety of courts ranging widely in size (i.e., 2 to 140 judges) and location (i.e., many different states and Canada) to take a cultural inventory and to use the results to chart a new course of direction. Despite the early stage of development, there are already important reactions to efforts to putting culture on the court community’s agenda.

• A striking reaction is that judges and administrators welcome the opportunity to see their culture in a more explicit light and the way it shapes choices about the way work gets done. Because many administrative decisions might be made by a small leadership, the inclusive opportunity for each judge to contribute to the definition of their court’s culture is an invitation many judges accepted. Also, due to the relatively widespread nature of an autonomous component in most courts, many judges appreciate the opportunity to discuss how work is done in chambers and on the bench with their colleagues.

• The vocabulary and the structure provided by the culture framework are well received. Judges and administrators grasp the
meaning of the cultures quickly and talk freely about what the culture survey reveals. They are adroit in noticing the shape of their current and preferred culture kites, and they comfortably describe themselves as being one or a particular combination of the four cultures in each work area.

- Every court appreciates the nuance underlying the array of four cultures. In fact, the values and practices of communal and networked cultures seem most intriguing to judges who perhaps are most familiar with the circumstances of an autonomous culture and perhaps envision a hierarchical court as its only alternative. For example, judges frequently ask questions about how judges agree upon “norms” and what do the norms cover?

- Even courts that are performing well see the value of cultural analysis. Group discussions raise areas that warrant improvement even in high performing courts. For example, a communal culture might seek to maintain a collegial and cooperative approach but find cultural analysis a fruitful means to strengthen formal communication channels to ensure everyone is informed of collective decisions and thereby expected to follow them. The dimension of solidarity reminds court leaders of the need to avoid the results of collective decisions from inadvertently being lost, misplaced, or forgotten due to the lack of standardized record-keeping and communication procedures.

- Courts are interested in culture as a tool to use in conjunction with other initiatives that are already underway, such as strategic planning and reengineering. A court may learn very quickly from the culture survey and subsequent discussions that it is overcommitted by having too many projects for the members of the court to juggle, lacks a sense of clear priorities, fails often to complete projects before taking up new ones, and might even treat projects as successful with limited evidence of positive performance.

These reactions show that judicial leaders in many courts see culture analysis as an essential prerequisite to successful innovation and reform. As more experience with this approach is gained, it will be possible to more clearly see the extent to which court culture in fact produces meaningful and lasting change in the real court world.

**CONCLUSION**

Court leaders and managers know, at least intuitively, that culture affects court operations. A long line of literature from the field of court administration clarifies that differences in court culture are a key factor in explaining differences in court performance. A contribution of the current research is the development of a conceptual framework and set of measurement tools that permits the variation in court culture to be described in a coherent and comprehensible manner. The four cultures of communal, networked, autonomous, and hierarchical are sufficiently broad to capture the way work gets done in the real world. Moreover, courts are spread across the four categories instead of being bunched up in one or two ambiguous categories, such as well and not so well managed.

In addition, the combination of cultures is measurable, avoiding the classification of courts into rigid, wooden, and unrealistic “pure” types. There might be some courts with very dominant cultures, but the culture framework accommodates this possibility without assuming it holds true everywhere. The results of measuring culture are a valid and reliable basis for changing the behavior of judges and managers. By comparing current and preferred cultures, practitioners can begin to explore a path, which they control, to greater institutional excellence and a more hospitable work environment for everyone. The capacity of a court to see the differences between where it is today and where it wants to be tomorrow enables it to reduce the problem of changing the way things get done to manageable proportions. A preferred culture provides a clear and meaningful target to shoot at and also sets the distance from where the court presently stands to suggest a timetable for making changes in goals and practices. Simply stated, a preferred culture is the basis for internally inspired reform that members of a court can understand.

Finally, the existence of alternative cultures is a prudential note of caution to externally inspired reform. Outside experts tend to propound the idea that reforms take on a fairly strict, programmatic form containing specific elements and prescribed relationships. Court improvement programs might mention the possibility of tailoring reforms to local needs and circumstances, but such a modest concession does not take into account the realities of alternative cultures. This concession fails to accommodate the fact that every court sees reforms through its own particular lenses. Consequently, if a reform incorporates only a particular cluster of values on how work should get done, receptivity to the reform will be limited to particular types of cultures and diminish the prospects for widespread diffusion of new ideas. Hence, reformers need to consider how courts can proceed in alternative ways to approximate a desired goal and practice.

Brian J. Ostrom is a principal court research consultant with the National Center for State Courts. His main research activities have ranged from the study of felony sentencing and the development of structured sentencing systems to civil justice reform to strategies for creating high performance courts. His interest in the idea of high performance grew primarily out of work with several state court systems regarding efforts to improve court organizational effectiveness through careful assessment of court management culture, judicial workload, and court performance. Contact him at bostrom@ncsc.org.

Roger Hanson is a consultant in the area of legal research and legal reform to the National Center for State Courts and other organizations. He specializes in evaluating and determining how to make procedural changes achieve their intended objectives within a court’s broader cultural and organizational contexts. His work in the federal court arena concerning prisoner litigation has been used in briefs submitted to and cases decided by the U.S. Supreme Court. Most recently he taught at the University of Colorado Law School and Political Science Department. Contact him at elizreg1558@comcast.net.